

December 13, 2002

DoD DETAILS MILITARY SMALLPOX VACCINATION PROGRAM

The Department of Defense today highlighted its plan to prepare for and respond to possible smallpox attacks against servicemembers. The Smallpox Vaccination Program is consistent with FDA guidelines and the best practice of medicine. This program supports the national smallpox preparedness plans announced by the President, but is tailored to the unique requirements of the Armed Forces. Like civilian communities, DoD will ensure preparedness by immunizing personnel based on their occupational responsibilities. These include smallpox response teams and hospital and clinic workers. DoD will proceed to vaccinate other designated forces having critical mission capabilities. DoD will use existing FDA-licensed smallpox vaccine. Like other vaccinations this will be mandated for designated personnel unless they are medically exempted.

"The Department of Defense is establishing a smallpox vaccination program to protect the health and safety of military personnel. Smallpox is a serious infectious disease. We cannot quantify the threat of it being used as a bioweapon; we know the consequences of its use could be great," said William Winkenwerder, assistant secretary of defense for health affairs. "Vaccinating servicemembers before an attack is the best way to ensure that our troops are protected and that they can continue their missions if a smallpox outbreak occurs."

Smallpox is caused by a virus called variola, which spreads from person to person through prolonged close contact. Smallpox can cause a severe rash covering the whole body that can leave permanent scars, high fever, severe headache or backache. Smallpox kills about three out of 10 people infected.

In the United States, routine vaccination against smallpox ended around 1972. In May 1980, the World Health Organization declared the global eradication of smallpox as a naturally occurring disease and recommended that all countries cease vaccination. Military smallpox vaccination programs continued longer. In 1984, routine military vaccinations were limited to recruits entering basic training. This practice was discontinued in 1990. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent anthrax letter attacks, the Department of Defense reassessed the threat of a smallpox attack. The resumption of a smallpox vaccination program is intended to ensure that the military can achieve its missions in case smallpox is used as a bioweapon. DoD continues to work closely with the Department of Health and Human Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to be prepared to protect the nation in the event of a smallpox outbreak.

Further information regarding the Department of Defense smallpox vaccination program can be found at: <http://www.vaccines.army.mil/smallpox.asp>